cruelties



an original play by max sparber

Cruelties is an original play by Max Sparber © 2001, some rights reserved. This script may be freely copied and shared, but productions of the play must be approved by the author. Contact Max Sparber at his email address: maxsparber@earthlink.net

Introduction

Cruelties is formatted oddly, so I shall explain it, and also explain the characters of the play. Each scene in *Cruelties* is a dialogue between my the character and a second character—in fact, an early, and bad, title for the play was *Dialogues*. Rather than write any stage directions, which I avoid, I have simply run the dialogue for my main character down the left side of the script, and the dialogue for his scene-partner on the right side of the script. While reading, it might help to imagine the right side of the page is actually having a conversation with the left side; that is how it is intended to look.

Cruelties runs backward in time, spanning from the early Eighties backwards to the early Sixties, so each new scene will actually pre-date the one before it chronologically. It might help to think of the play as a murder mystery, in which we wind our way backward in time to the origin of the murder, flashbacks opening into a new flashbacks.

Here is a brief description of the play's characters:

Our main character, represented by the left side of the page, is a writer. He is a small, petty, chubby man with a predilection for flowery language, white linen suits, straw hats, and misbehavior. He begins the play in his early sixties, but he looks old beyond it. He is morose and exhausted, his every comment caustic and cruel. Over the course of the play, we will watch him age backwards into his younger self, at the fading of his youth, just at the start of his success as a writer. In these scenes, there is less of an edge to him—he is unsparingly honest, as ever, but his honesty is tempered by a quality of mercy that he will eventually lose, and a profligate ambition that he will eventually despise. These are the people he meets in our journey backwards through his biography, each represented by the right side of the page in the appropriate scene:

His former researcher and editor, once a very dear friend, now long estranged. She is brittle and measured in everything she says and does, sharp-tongued and not given to whimsy or overearnest expressions of sentiment.

A television talk-show host, mannered and pedantic. His show is

intended to be smart and grave in tone, with guest expressing serious opinions about art and literature through puffs of cigarette smoke while idling on circular hard-plastic chairs under glaring lights. I see the talk-show host as wearing a natty white turtleneck shirt under a double-breasted blue blazer with a great, swooping collar. I imagine him as having a dapper little moustache and a mushroom-shaped pouf of curly hair.

A Cuban prostitute, alert and sycophantic, experienced in sussing out his clients desires and molding himself to fit them. He adores fame and wealth, he adores the famous and the wealthy, and he has an easy, insinuating manner with those he adores. He is pretty, amiable, muscular, and dense in a practiced way.

A redheaded socialite, a former close friend and confidante to our hero. She has followed a similar path to his, moving from exuberant playfulness to stll-exuberant decay in just a few short years. She also shares his habit of saying whatever she pleases, consequences-be-damned, and has become accustomed to the most superficial of friendships. She behaves in a flat, snitty manner with everybody, affecting an air of supreme indifference, and expressing little but the most petty opinions.

The Mick, our hero's thoughtless nickname for his rugged Irish-American boyfriend, a brick of a man with a curiously polite manner and an unexpectedly rough temper. The Mick is given to lecturing in as sad a manner as he can muster, but there is a decidedly military quality about him that registers grief as something smaller—as though a Boy Scout troop leader were lecturing his boys about not having spent enough time mastering the art of knotting ropes.

The cowboy, a convicted killer suffering under the unendurable weight of his own fast-approaching execution. Despite his limited education and rural upbringing, the cowboy sees himself as having a poetic soul, which he pursues without much skill by writing little songs and by memorizing and then misapplying words from the dictionary. The cowboy is unusually beautiful and unusually aware of that fact. He has spent his life working his fine features to his advantage, and subsequently has a flirty, show-offy manner, and a defeated expectation that he will be easily forgiven.

Decades

Don't greet me yet.

No?

Let me sit down first.

Oh! Look at you! Are you not well?

Sick.

Sick, my, yes! Let me help you.

Thank you. I hope this is not too unpleasant a surprise.

Unexpected.

It was impromptu. I found myself at the airport
and could not think of a reason not to visit.
It must decades. Decades, yes?

At least a decade. Since we ended
our professional relationship.

Are you still angry about that?

I was never angry about it. There.

Thank you. Now you may greet me.

Hello.

I have a better greeting to suggest.

Do you?

Indulge me. It’s Buddhist and, I suppose,
enormously meaningful

All right. What?

Repeat: Who is it?

Who is it?

That is dragging?

That is dragging?

That corpse around?

That corpse around?

I have wondered that myself.

Corpse, yes. You don't look well.

I would say I am not well.

Have you slept much?

Slept? No. Sleep is for sissies, ha ha.
I'm too rugged for that! Why, is it late?

Two a.m.

Oh, it is! I'm still on New York time.

Where it is five a.m.?

And the party is just starting, darling. Did I wake you?

Well, no. Honestly, it is good to have company.

I didn't wake you?

I have been sleeping badly.

When I sleep, I sleep like the dead.

When is that?

I don't remember.

Yes, your notorious sleep habits. I heard the television interview.

I beg your pardon? You heard it?

They rebroadcast part of it on the radio here in Los Angeles. You're still very much a celebrity, you know. You made quite a stir.

Yes? What did you think?

Do you want to know?

God yes.

I did not enjoy it. Honestly, it brought tears to my eyes.

Oh, did it!

Yes.

For the love of God, why?

You seemed — how to put it?

Mad?

I was going to say fragile. But your suggestion works just as well. What were you thinking?

Daytime television seems so dull to me. I just wanted to spice it up a little.

You did that. I kept waiting for men in white suits to run onstage and drag you off in butterfly nets.

If only. I should have had you script my interview. You have such a sensational authorial voice!

Breaking down in front of a million television viewers isn't sensational enough?

Everything I do is sensational. But it will never creep into my writing.

Not at the rate you write it won't.

Aha. Imagine that I have just yelped in pain. I will grant you that one. As a man, I am a wreck. As a writer, I am beyond aide.

Goodness. You do seem in an awful state.

Yes. I am a disaster. But every disaster has an interesting story.

After your interview on television I would not have thought that you would have any stories left.

Is that what you think? Ha ha! My love, the show might have been for children. My best stories have a considerably more adult rating!

Ugh. I don't want to hear them.

But you will need to put them in my biography!

I beg your pardon?

My biography! My biography!

Why do you keep shouting that at me? I can't imagine that you are suggesting that I should write your biography.

Who else?

Why don't you write it?

I won't live that long.

I believe that. But I can't do it.

Oh, why not?

I can give you three reasons offhand. I am not a journalist. I have a sensational voice. And I am constantly shocked by you.

But the last reason is why I want you to write it! I deserve no less! If I am not spoken of in an appalled tone, why have I bothered living?

Biography! Is that what you are doing here?

Did you believe I was lonely for company?

I suppose it would be silly to think that.

My close personal friends number in the tens of thousands.

It must be difficult.

Imagine it, if you will. I must meet hundreds of people per day, but when I wake in the morning and look in the mirror I do not even know myself.

When you wake up?

When I wake up, yes.

And when is that?

I don't remember. But you cannot imagine what a social gaffe it is to not remember the name of your coke dealer.

I cannot imagine, no.

And I have seven coke dealers. I used to call them all Chico. But coke dealers can be nasty. They don't care if you are a famous writer. They don't mind slapping you in public, in the middle of a party! Sometimes they would be so cruel as to refuse me my cocaine.

Oh dear.

Yes! Hustlers don't care if you call them all Chico —
they all seem to be named Chico anyway. But drug dealers?

Nasty?

Just as I said. Nasty.

Marvelous.

Jealous?

I can't say I am. You were never very good
to your old friends.

Hah! So you are angry!

No. I suppose I should have known that you have a
habit of dropping your friends. But I have seen your
new friends, and your tastes are worsening. I open
magazines sometimes and there you are, surrounded by
strangers, and they all look like malicious skeletons to me.

What an image! I can't imagine which photos you are referring to.

From that club in New York.

The club! Yes. I have found a way to make
an ongoing public spectacle of myself.

You should do more television interviews.

I would if they would let me dance.

You're an awful dancer.

Yes. Thank goodness the club has no mirrors.
And when people see me on the dance floor,
they don't point and laugh.

No?

No. They point and say "My God. Is that . . .?"
And I wave, and a new dance comes on. Sometimes
pretty little creatures come over and dance alongside me.

Pretty little creatures.

The boys, of course. Not that I'm much good
with boys nowadays. But do you really want to
talk about my ruined sex life?

I don't want the details. Have you seen a doctor?

Yes. He nearly had a stroke from the horror of it.
He told me my impotency is the least of my problems.
He told me if I continued what I was doing
I would be dead in six months.

When did he tell you this?

Three years ago. I win.

Bravo.

You are more difficult to talk to than I recalled.
Almost everybody laughs politely at my comments.
I did not remember you as being so snippy.

Snippy?

I was always the sharp-tongued one.

So. Yes you were. I don't mean to disapprove.
It is just that your life is so ...

Dissolute? Depraved? Squalid? Sordid? Stop me when
I find a word that seems appropriate.

They all seem appropriate. I mean, you were
always a drunk — but there was a time when

you were also a writer.

Yes. Who would have thought that the writer
would die before the drunk would? After all,
the drunk was so goddamn unhealthy. But here I am, the drunk,
after having buried the writer — when?

Decades?

It seems likely.

You could write if you wanted to.

No. I want to. It is like my impotence. But in
this case the body is able but the spirit is not willing.
I even saw a psychotherapist about it.

What did he say?

He told me if I continued what I was doing I would
be dead in six months.

Is this where your friends would laugh politely?

Yes it is.

Ha ha.

Thank you. Will you ask me something?

Is it Buddhist?

No. Bit it's innocuous. Tell me you will —
Humor me.

Then yes I will.

Repeat: What is the thing?

What is the thing?

You regret most?

You regret most?

I will tell you my greatest regret, but I do not wish you to think me petty.

It is too late. You have made an art of pettiness.

Not in my crime book. There was not a petty note in that book.

It detailed a petty crime.

No. The crime began as petty, but it escalated to murder.

The murderers were petty men.

Did you think so? Then I failed as a writer.
I found them magnificent. They had oversized ambitions.

To steal from a farmhouse and murder a family?

No. Dear God, no. That wasn't their ambition.
They wanted to get into heaven. It was their desire for redemption that made them magnificent.
Can you not see that?

I would have seen those men as sick and dangerous. I would have seen them as awful creatures whose sole distinguishing feature was their cruelty. That is why I could not have written your book.

Well, I did not need you to write the book.
It was enough to have you assist me in researching it. But I have not answered your question.

Please do so.

Ask it again.

What is your greatest regret?

I have never wanted to get into heaven.

Then you will not be disappointed when you don't.

I suspect I would be disappointed if I did. None
of my friends will be there.

Present company included.

You still view yourself as my friend?

Yes, if you can believe it. Certainly, yes.

Do you think you won't go to heaven for that?
I think you will. I think the angels will tally up
your sins and then weigh them out, and they
will say: It does not matter that she sinned.
She was capable of forgiving a dying old cocksucker.
The doors to heaven will swing open.

There was nothing to forgive.

There will be. And you shall document it.

I hope you are not planning anything dramatic.

I am not planning anything at all, except that
you write my biography.

I am flattered you chose me.

You weren't my first choice.

Then I am less flattered.

My first choice lives 16 miles from here.
He contacted me by telephone six months ago.
He wanted to write my life story. He sent me
samples of his work. He would have done
a remarkable job.

Then why are you at my house and not his?

An accident of timing, really. I was on the way to his house. I did not get there.

What prevented you?

My left arm went numb. I was not certain I would make it to his house, so I asked the taxicab to stop at yours.

What? How is your arm now?

I cannot move it.

Oh, dear God. You fool. We must get you to a doctor. Can you stand?

While we have been talking I have stopped feeling my feet.

I will call for an ambulance!

No! I do not want that!

I don't care what you want.

If you exit this room I might not be alive when you return to it. I will be dead before the ambulance ever arrives.

Why? Tell me what you are feeling.

I am feeling my body die. Bit by bit it is turning itself off. I don't mind it.

Are you in pain?

No. I took quite a few painkillers in the taxicab. I can feel everything that is happening in my body, but there is no discomfort.

Oh, you fool! You have poisoned yourself!

God, no. I don't have the heart for suicide.
I am simply dying. It is quite strange —
there is a coldness creeping up my body.

We shall get you to the hospital.

Are you going to insist on this?

Yes I am.

I must tell you something.

After I make the call.

No. I do not wish to die before I say this.
It is why you must write my biography.
You alone will know it.

After I make the call.

God damn you! Before! The telephone call
can wait for one fucking minute!

Very well. Tell me. Quickly.

I was murdered.

What?

Ah, now you are interested! I knew that
if I threw a little bit of sensationalism in,
you would be hooked!

Somebody did this to you?

Yes. Oh yes.

Who?

The boy from my crime book. The cowboy.

What? The cowboy?

Yes.

What is this nonsense? Let go of my hand!

Let me finish. I shall let go when I finish.
Otherwise you will need to drag me into
the next room to make the telephone call.
Won't that be fun?

Then tell me! Make some fucking sense!

He murdered me!

You're hysterical. Do you see that
you are becoming hysterical?

God damn you, listen. I have never told
anybody what I just told you. Somebody
had to know. I saw them put the rope around
his neck and drop him through the trapdoor.
I did not do anything to stop it!

Let me make the call.

Oh, God. Driving home from the hanging,
I had to stop. I sat in the car for a full hour
and wept. I watched him die, and I felt myself
die with him.

You haven't died yet.

Not yet? No. All right. Make the call.

Interview

We can stop if you like.

I do not.

We do not need to continue.

I wish to continue.

You do not mind that I am asking you these questions?

Quite the opposite. I am delighted.

But you must know that the audience might not understand what they are seeing.

I disagree. They will know exactly what they are seeing.

But the intimacy of your answers …

May I make a suggestion?

Of course.

It is a professional recommendation.

Then by all means.

You know that I have done many interviews.

Yes, of course.

Then here is my advice.

Please.

Never stop an interview. Even when your subject is falling to pieces before your eyes; even if they beg you to stop; even if you feel the deepest sympathy for them.

I don't believe I can do that. I would not want to.

As an interviewer, I would ask questions
of a man who was dying in front of me.
Even up until his final breath. It may be cruel,
but you get the best quotes that way.

We are almost back from the commercial break.
I thank you for your advice, but I must ask you
again if you wish to stop.

This interview will end when I stop talking.

Very well. And we are back. For those of you
who have just tuned in, today's show has
been unusual. I have a guest with me today
who is one of the most influential writers of
our generation, who has in the past
few years become something of a celebrity.

A public spectacle.

As, I suppose, are all celebrities. What makes
this interview so unusual for me is your candor.
I have never had a guest reveal so many
intimate details of his life in this manner.

No? How fortunate for you. Won't Carson be jealous!

Perhaps he will. I must commend you on
your bravery, sir. It is a rare man that would
go on television and discuss his homosexuality,
for example.

It is just the wine talking.

Let me ask you about that. You have — I hope you
will forgive me for bringing this up — you have had
problems with alcohol in the past, have you not?

I do not think alcohol is a problem. Everybody else,
however, disagrees. I had a lover who used to throw

out my bottles. But I found that if I hid them in the tank for the toilet, he would not find them.

I see. Let me ask a frank question. You are, are you not, an alcoholic?

An alcoholic? Oh, God, darling — alcoholism is just the joker in the deck.

Are you in fact now drunk, sir?

Drunk? Well, drunk is the least of it. If I were to read to you an itemized list of the drugs I have taken in the past week this show would go on for several hours.

And have you even been to bed in the past week?

To bed? Yes. But I have not slept. Excuse my giggling.

I see.

It is not what you think. Oh, I giggle again, but imagine that I have a remorseful look on my face. Because it is worse than you think.

How do you mean?

I have an awful lot of money, you know. There are young men who will take money to provide services.

Services of a sexual nature?

Oh my, yes.

How old are these boys?

What an excellent question; I am surprised you asked it. How old are they? They all claim to be 18. But I have not checked their drivers' licenses. Some of them look like they are 14 or 15.

Who are these boys?

They come from all over. They love fine clothes; they love to mingle with the famous. They love drugs and they love money. They do not mind being toys to ancient trolls like me if it gets them any of these things.

These boys are homosexual?

I believe everybody to be a homosexual until I find out otherwise. But I suspect many of them are not. Enough money and alcohol will turn anybody into a fairy.

Where do you meet these boys?

The club.

So the club is a marketplace for sex and drugs?

Yes. Yes, but — but the whole world is a marketplace for sex and drugs. If you were to drop me from an airplane into Wahoo, Nebraska, I would have a gram of cocaine and a male prostitute within 20 minutes.

Isn't that a bit cynical?

Have you ever been to Wahoo?

I see. I am going to be very blunt, sir: Most, admitting these things, would be consumed by shame. Do you feel any shame, sir?

Darling, I feel nothing but shame. I take shame to bed with me at night and wake up with it in the morning.

Then why do you continue?

Oh, it is no fun unless it is shameful. If you wish to know your soul, ask for the thing you

are most mortified to ask for. Demand the thing you would be most ashamed to possess.

Do you know your soul as a result?

Yes.

Do you like what you know about yourself?

Oh, ha ha. Hardly — my greatest pleasure is in seeing myself as horrible. No, horrible is such a bland word. As journalists, we must ever search for the exact word. Odious is closer. Detestable.

It is interesting to me that your answer made you laugh. Does all this — the drug use, the alcoholism, the sexual perversity — does it somehow seem like a comedy to you?

My God, no. I wouldn't be much of a writer if I didn't see this for what it is.

And what is it?

It's a tragedy, isn't it?

And you know what will happen if you continue the way you have?

Of course. I will die. That's how tragedies end, isn't it? Were it a comedy, it would end with me getting married.

Then why don't you stop?

Can you see me married? Me? No, my dear, I do not wish to stop. I do not mind the thought of dying. I will gladly trade my life for drugs and alcohol and perversion.

But what about us?

I don't know what you mean.

Us. The people who read your books.

What of them?

Why subtract your talent from the world?
You have a way of writing that has moved
millions of people. Your book on the murders
of that farm family did as much to change the
way people understand crime, and understand
the death penalty, as anything written.
Why take that away from us?

I don't know if you have noticed, but I have l
ong ceased to function as a writer.

Why?

I did not have the heart for it. I am not
a great man. Did you know that as a child I
always had hurt feelings?

Always?

Yes. I was spoiled. If anything did not go
my way I thought that there was an injustice
in the whole of the world. I would throw terrible
tantrums. I would harbor grudges for years.
I never outgrew that.

You still throw tantrums and keep grudges?

And I still have hurt feelings. I am small-minded
and do not like it when I do not have my way.
I become a terrible beast. I put sugar in gas tanks.

How does this prevent you from writing?

I wrote about things that moved me. It is
like taking a lover. Sooner or later you will be hurt.
I could not stand it.

What have you written that has hurt you?

What hasn't? Did you read the excerpt from
my novel in Playboy?

Yes.

Do you know that when I see the people I wrote
about, I flee across the street? I am not subtle
about it either. I just turn and run through traffic,
with my whole retinue trailing behind me.
I am a coward.

Why do you run?

Because I can't face them. I behaved monstrously
toward these people; they had been my friends.
But you can't be a writer and also be a coward.
There is something essentially monstrous about
writing, particularly if you choose to tell the truth.

So you regret writing the story?

No. I regret that I only ever wrote that one story,
and didn't finish the novel. I regret my cowardice.
But who has time for regrets when all of life has
become a limitless opportunity for gaiety? It is
gloriously distracting.

A psychiatrist might suggest that you live this life
you live, with the partying and the drug use, to
escape your cowardice, your self-loathing, your shame.

A psychiatrist might suggest such a thing?

Yes.

And so might a 6-year-old child. It is as plain
as the scarred, mashed nose on my fat, red face.
I bury my pain in my degraded life. I surround myself
with people who are likewise in pain. But the coke

and the liquor and the gossip takes the edge off.

I am getting the signal that it is time to take a break. We will return to this fascinating interview after these commercials and station identification.

Oh, pooh. I was just finding my rhythm.

Are you enjoying this?

Aren't you?

No, sir, I am not. I had thought we would discuss literature.

You won't win a Pulitzer discussing literature.

I won't win a Pulitzer anyway; This is television.

What a marvelous medium! Perhaps you will not win a Pulitzer, but with this show you will win something grander.

What?

Notoriety. I myself shall tune in tomorrow to see what celebrity has a nervous breakdown on your show.

I would not enjoy hosting such a show.

But you are doing so well today! You are very good at asking follow-up questions.

I do not wish to become an excellent gossip columnist.

I would not worry about that. Gossip columnists work exclusively in print, don't they?

Not after today they don't.

You seem angry.

I suppose I am. I did not realize you were destroying yourself. I did not know I would be witness to it. It is a horrendous waste.

You would not say that if you had been to the parties I have been to.

I see. Just a moment. We are back. During the break our guest informed me that I would not think his alcoholism and drug abuse was a waste if I had been to some of the parties he has seen. Tell me, sir, what is it about these parties that are so remarkable?

The fact that you will never be invited.

That sounds somewhat insulting.

It is not meant to be. You are a lovely man. But what makes these parties special is that they are exclusive. You will never see what goes on behind closed doors. I will.

Is it really that marvelous?

No. But gossiping about it afterward is. I mean, if I were to go to just any party and see a good-looking young man screaming at his girlfriend, it is a bore. But if that young man is a porn star and his girlfriend is a model?

It is better gossip?

At the very least the costumes will be better. You would be surprised how much livelier a story becomes with the addition of a spangled décolletage.

But there must be more to life than gossip.

Must there? If there is I haven't found it.

I disagree. I have read your novels.

You have read my novels.

Yes.

And you disagree? My early novels were n
othing but gossip! They were fiction, yes —
but very catty.

Are you telling me that good literature is just
another sort of gossip?

You wanted to talk about literature. If you prefer,
we can return to talking about male prostitutes.
I have a diverting story about a Cuban hustler I
met a few years ago who just completed his
memoirs. I could tell you that story, if that's what
you want to discuss.

Why don't you decide. Tell me, what is it
that you wish to discuss?

Oh — that is the hardest question I have ever been
asked. Do you mind if I think about it for a moment?

May I make a suggestion?

Please.

Give me a question to ask you.

Marvelous! What sort of question would you like?

A hard one. The hardest possible.

Oh. Oh. Bravo! With that challenge this interview
has ceased to be what I want it to be.

What is that?

A game — an act of foolishness on my part;
something to giggle about later.

Do you wish to end the interview?

Not when it has just become so interesting.

I fear it is almost over. We have just a few minutes left.

Time for one last question.

Yes. If you will provide it.

I will. Here is my question: What is the worst thing you have ever done?

I will ask you the question. Will you be honest with the answer?

Yes.

Then tell me, what is the worst thing you have ever done?

The worst thing I have ever done. I know what it is. I have always known. But I have such a fear of saying it.

Whisper it.

I can't force the words out.

Whisper it to me.

I shall do so. The worst thing I have ever done.

Yes?

Is publish my crime novel.

Do you mind if I repeat it out loud?

I do mind, very much. But your show must have a suitable end.

The answer was: The worst thing I have ever done was publish my crime novel. I must admit that was the last answer I expected.

I should have cut off my hands rather than write the thing.

Why do you feel this way?

Because three people were murdered in that farmhouse.

Yes.

And two men were executed for the crime.

Yes.

And I made my fortune from it. And I love my money, and I love my fame. I would not trade them for anything.

Would you trade those things if it meant the people in the farmhouse would not have been murdered?

No. I would take my money and fame in trade for their lives.

Would you trade it for the lives of the men who were hanged?

No. That is why I am a monster

That is all the time we have for today.

Pretty Little Creatures

You should write about this.

What do you mean by this?

This sort of thing.

Male prostitution?

No! I am not a prostitute!

Darling, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but
you take money for sex. You are a male prostitute.

If you continue to insult me, I shall leave.

But I have not paid you yet.

I do not want your money.
You are very offensive to me.

Oh, God. I take it back. All right, you are not a
male prostitute. What would you rather I call you?

Do I need to tell you? I am your friend.

I do not give money to my friends.

Yes you do.

Well, you're right — but I only give money because
I must. Do you give money to your friends?

No.

You see? But you're fun to be around.

So I am no different from any
of your friends.

Do you mean that you couldn't stand to be around me if I didn't pay you?

No. I mean you give me gifts, like you do everybody.

But you take money for sex.

No! We have never had sex!

Well, don't start screaming. You have taken money to have sex while I watch. I don't see what the difference is.

One is a prostitute. The other is an entertainer. Why are you laughing?

I'm sorry. You're right. You're an entertainer. I find you very entertaining.

Thank you. I also find you entertaining.

Then perhaps you should be paying me.

You don't need my money.

True, but you don't have to pay me with money.

What then?

Tell me a story.

What sort of story?

About your friends. Who is that black boy you know?

Which one?

The tall one with the shaved head. He has the little scar on his lip.

Caesar.

Caesar! What an imposing name! Where is he from?

Cuba. Like me.

Tell me about him.

Why?

Perhaps I shall write about it.

Like you did with those two killers?

Like I did with … You have been reading my book?

Yes.

This is not very much like the stories I wrote about those two men.

Then perhaps you will not find my stories so interesting. Perhaps you will be bored by them.

Let me be the judge of that.

What do you want to know?

What do you boys do together?

Stuff.

Stuff?

I don't know.

Stuff? You don't know? Well, then, I will tell you something about writing.

Yes?

There is only one job a journalist has.

One job?

Yes. Everybody has a story to tell.

Everybody?

Yes. And it is the job of the journalist to turn them into storytellers.

How do you do that?

By asking the right sort of questions. And I have not been asking you the right sort of questions about Caesar.

No?

No. Because your answers have been boring the shit out of me. Let us start over.

Okay.

Is Caesar your lover?

No. I do not sleep with men for pleasure.

No. But have you ever slept with him?

Slept with him? No. We both fucked the same woman.

How?

You want the details?

Christ yes! The more lurid, the better!

Lurid?

Graphic. As graphic as possible. Be very detailed in your descriptions.

I fucked her from behind while she sucked on his cock. Then we turned her around and she sucked on my cock while he fucked her.

Ha! I knew there was a grand story in you somewhere! Who was this woman?

A woman that I met at the club.

Don't be coy with me; I know everybody at the club. Tell me who it was!

Guess!

Nasty. You're making me work for the story. Give me a hint.

Red hair.

Long red hair?

Yes.

Oh my God, you don't mean …!

Yes!

Oh God, that's too funny! Did she pay you?

Now you insult me again.

Oh, come on — she must have paid you! She's almost 50 years old!

She's how old?

She's 30 years your senior, honey.

Really?

Oh no. Tell me she didn't get you and Caesar for free.

She did not pay me. I am not a whore.

An entertainer, I know. Christ. She must have put something in your drink.

She did not need to put it in my drink.
She just gave it to me to swallow.

What was it? A pill?

Yes. Amongst a lots of other things.

What other things? Cocaine?

Maybe.

Amphetamines?

I don't know what we took.

Sweet Jesus, you must have fucked all night.

All night? Yes.

Oh, God, am I jealous of her. Her! Do you know we used to be great friends?

She does not seem to like you.

Well, we are not friends anymore.

Why not?

Because I wrote about her. She was a character in a story I published.

Yes?

Now you're just being kind, letting an old man go on like this about his sad memories.

No. I want to know!

Why, you little sycophant? Don't pretend to listen to my awful stories unless you're really interested.

I am interested.

Why?

Maybe I want to write about you.

All right, for the present I shall pretend that
you are telling the truth. Why don't you pretend
that I am flattered that you are interested in my life?

I can do that. I like to pretend.

Oh, I know you do, you little Rosicus! Well, continue
your pretending and ask me a question.

Did she have a story to tell you?

Who?

The redhead?

Oh. No. At least, I never asked her. But everybody
I know has a story to tell about her. I listened to
those stories and then wrote about them.

What sorts of stories?

There are only so many stories you can tell about
people who are rich and decadent. They lie, they
fuck people when they shouldn't. They don't fuck
people when they should. They spend their money
on stupid things. They are hateful and foolish. They
are petty. They use drugs. They carry little dogs with them.

Yes.

So you already know all this.

Yes.

Those are all of the stories about rich people.

And you are rich!

You know I am, you adorable gold digger.

Then I will write about you!

Oh? Which would you tell?

Which story is yours?

They all are, except the dogs.

You don't have as little dog?

My little dog died. When I wrote about the redhead, I might as well have been writing autobiography. Do you know, she cornered me in a bathroom a few years ago and I tried to tell her that.

Because you are also rich — but also wicked.

Yes. Rich and wicked.

If I were rich, I would be exactly like you.

What? God, if you weren't so eager to please, that statement would stop my heart! What on earth do mean by that?

I would drive a Jaguar like you do. I would have dinner with royal people, like you do. I would travel, I would go on talk shows, and everybody would think that I am fascinating.

It sounds so appealing when you say it. But you don't need to be rich for any of those things. You can drive my Jaguar anytime you want.

Yes?

Of course. And you travel, don't you?

Yes.

I'll introduce you to royalty if you like. If fact,
I know a Bulgarian who would be very interested
in meeting you. There is a pun there somewhere,
but I am too drunk to find it.

And talk shows?

I should take you with me onto a talk show.
Oh, my goodness, the stories you could tell!

So we are not so different at all.

Well, I would flatter myself to believe it. But there
is one large difference between us.

Yes?

Do you know what the difference is?

No.

I am a whore.

Some whore! You can't even get your cock to work!

Oh! Cruel! I meant that I will do almost anything
for money. I have. I have done awful things for money.

But not like me.

No. My God, no! Who would pay me to entertain?

I have known some people who might.

Really? They go for lisping dwarves? There is a
fetish for that?

Only for fat ones.

Ah! You make me howl in pain, you cruel child!

But you like it.

God, I think I do.

Bitch, I know you like it!

Maybe.

Maybe? Fuck maybe. You want to hear maybe?
I'll tell you a few maybes.

My breath is in my throat!

Because maybe you are perverted?

I must be.

Maybe it makes me want to be cruel to you. Maybe
sometimes when I hear your voice I want to slap
you in the face.

When is that?

When I'm fucking.

Really?

Yeah. It is hard to fuck when you are watching.

It is?

Maybe you want to hear about my hard cock.

Oh my God yes.

Maybe you want to hear about me sliding it into
some sweet, tight asshole.

Jesus. Of course!

Yeah, you love to hear about it. You love to hear that I ram my prick in and out, and you love to hear me groaning and talking.

I do love it. I love to hear what you say!

I say, "Take that cock. Take it! Take it all, motherfucker!" And I reach around and stroke his cock, and my balls feel like they are going to explode, they are so hard, slapping against his legs.

Yes.

And then I hear your voice.

My voice?

Your voice. Talking.

Yes? What am I saying.

You're lisping at me in that little girl voice. "Fuck him," you say. "Move your leg so I can see your cock! Pull out and shoot it on his face." And I hate your voice.

Oh. Hate?

Hate. It drives me fucking crazy. I want to run across the room and grab you. I want to grab your ears and bang your head against the wall. I want to see blood pour out of your nose and hear you crying in pain.

What keeps you from hurting me?

If I hurt you, I won't get paid.

I see. Yes, that makes sense.

Ha! How was that?

How was that?

Did I scare you?

Do you know, you did. I feel very frightened right now.

I was sufficiently cruel?

You were very cruel.

Did you like that?

No.

You didn't? I thought you wanted me to …

You thought I wanted you to? I suppose I did.
You did what I wanted you to.

I don't think so. I think you are unhappy now.
If I didn't think you would like it, I would never have ... !

It is not your fault.

No, I do not want you to be unhappy.
I did not mean what I said.

It does not matter.

Some people like that, when I talk to them like that!
I was trying to make you happy.

I know. Eager to please. But why?

Because I am your friend.

Because you are my friend?

I am your friend.

Then I suppose I owe you some money.

That Old Thing

Did you come in here to hide from me?

Yes.

You could have picked a better place than the bathroom. Did you think I would never come in here?

It is the men's bathroom.

No it isn't.

It isn't?

It's the women's.

It is not well marked. I have been using it as the men's bathroom for seven months.

Do you think I mean to harm you?

Do I think what?

That I mean to harm you? Maybe you think I'm going to walk up to you and slap your face. Is that why you ran away from me?

I don't know what I thought. Slap my face?
Maybe throw vitriol in it. Something violent.

I saw you run away from me before. You saw me walking toward you. On Broadway.

Yes.

You ran right through traffic. I thought you were going to kill yourself.

I nearly did. A motorcycle bumped my side.
I almost fell in front of a bus.

You don't need to run. I haven't read it.

You haven't?

No.

You had better hurry out and buy it. Playboy
has almost sold out, from what I hear. If you
miss this issue, you won't be able to read the story.

I don't want to read it. I never liked your writing anyway.

Aren't you curious? You're the main character.

I don't care what people write about me. When
you have no reputation at all, you have no reputation
to defend. My motto. Cute, isn't it?

Cute. Yes. What are those? Are those amphetamines?

Yes.

May I have one?

Yes. There are some people who are furious.

I know.

Fewer than you would think. Most people think
the story is pretty funny.

They should be furious.

Why?

Because I will not be throwing any more parties.

That's a shame. They will be disappointed.

I got what I needed.

What? The skeletons in our closets? You're welcome to them. We all knew you were writing that damned silly book.

I spoke of it often.

You spoke of it endlessly. You pestered us with questions and demanded our gossip. We were surprised that you weren't constantly jotting down notes.

I have trained my memory so that I don't need to.

Really?

Yes. When I was writing the crime novel. I discovered people didn't want to talk to me if I was taking notes. So I trained my memory to retain an hour of conversation at a time.

God, but your parties went on for 10 hours — sometimes more!

But out of those 10 hours I would only get a few minutes worth of stuff that was really usable.

Like what?

Like your abortion.

That old thing? I can't see why it would interest you.

It is the story I published in Playboy.

The story is about my abortion?

Among other things. Didn't anybody tell you?

No. But everybody I talked to seems to think the story is about them.

Perhaps you should read it before we talk anymore.

Aw, fuck it. If I read it I will just have to chase you down. And I don't care to run t hrough traffic. What is that?

Cocaine.

It looks odd. What are those brown specks?

It is cut with several different pharmaceuticals.

Which ones?

I don't remember. The dealer named them all so quickly.

What does it do?

It's different. It makes the coke less harsh. It's like doing regular coke, but without that jaggedness.

Can I try it?

Yes.

Oh.

Interesting, huh?

Yes. Are you going to keep avoiding me?

Yes.

Even though I don't care about the story.

Yes.

Why?

Events need to proceed logically. It is not logical for me to cross all my friends and then attempt to remain friends.

So what then? You're just going to drop all your old relationships?

Yes.

They will miss you.

I doubt it.

They will miss your parties.

Yes. But I always thought my parties were unbearably tedious. There was only one moment at the parties that I liked.

What?

Arriving at them.

Oh, yes. In the limos.

In costume.

With the press waiting. All the photos!

Yes. There was nothing like leafing through the newspaper the next day looking for photographs of your friends.

And then making fun of how they dressed.

Or whispering gossip about them.

I never understood your obsession with gossip. Nobody has interesting stories. They all sin the s ame way. And none of their sins are interesting.

It doesn't matter if the story is interesting.
Gossip is a tool for social survival.

Is it really?

Do you know when you have really arrived?

No.

When you know everybody's secrets.
Otherwise you are just another stranger.

I don't want to know anybody's secrets.
I'm even bored with my own.

After the Playboy story, you don't have any
more secrets.

Then I suppose I should thank you.

You're welcome.

But I don't think you are correct.

Correct about what?

About when you have arrived. It is
not when you know everybody's secrets.

No?

It's when everybody knows yours.

Ah.

The most powerful person in the room
is the one who everybody gossips about. No?

Then I suppose I have failed. Nobody gossips a
bout me.

You idiot. Do you think a freak like you can go through life unnoticed? You were a subject of gossip before you even published your first book.

I was? What did people say?

They said you were a fag.

Is that all? Sooner or later, everybody is called a fag. The only rumor that is more common is that somebody has a venereal disease.

Oh.

What?

People also said you had a venereal disease.

Really? Which one?

The clap.

Oh God — the most common venereal disease story! Am I that boring?

Well, there are two rumors every girl must deal with.

Yes?

That we're sluts and that we had an abortion.

I have heard such stories about you.

Yes. And then published them, it seems.

They were good stories.

They seem awfully plain to me.

But you don't see the pathos! A 19-year-old girl sleeps with her father's business partner, becomes

pregnant. The father pays for the abortion. The girl suffers severe depression as a result and slips into a spiral of drug abuse. It's heartbreaking!

How strange. From what I hear, you wrote it as a comedy.

Satire, really; It is not a very funny story.

It didn't seem funny to me when it happened. But I don't know why I became so depressed.

It was tragic.

Hardly. Those farm murders you wrote about were tragic. My affair, my abortion, was woefully common. Do you know I had three friends who had abortions that same month?

Teenage girls do seem to like to do everything together.

I never stopped sleeping with daddy's business partner, either.

No?

You didn't hear that story?

No! What a long affair you had! Didn't he d ie two years ago?

Yes. I slept with him in the hospital the day before he died. His wife was with his doctor, discussing insurance. It was quite embarrassing, really. I was having my period — droplets of blood everywhere. The nurse thought it was his. Might as well have been. He had a stroke that night and died at two in the morning.

Well, maybe he died happy.

I didn't hate him, you know. I was fond of him.

I feel like I should call Playboy and add a few paragraphs to my story.

That's the trouble with gossip.

What?

It's incomplete. The story is so much better when you hear it from the person who experienced it.

I disagree. When you hear it from somebody else it is daring, or naughty, or horrifying. The moment you put a human face on it, gossip just becomes sad and seedy.

I have heard a rumor about you. Tell me, will it turn sad and seedy if I ask you about it?

I am a fag. I've never had the clap.

I heard the mick broke your nose.

Oh, that is a good rumor! That's one I never expected to hear.

Is it true?

Do you think the mick was capable of such a thing?

I can't tell. He was so outdoorsy. With weather-beaten skin and that gray-flecked red hair. He looked like a man who wouldn't mind a fight.

Well, you know how it is. You say boo to a s traight man, he turns and runs, but you get a tough-looking fairy angry there will be teeth flying.

So is it true.

He loved to lecture me. But sometimes he would throw things. Look here.

A little welt.

A scar. He caught me on the bridge of my nose.

Broken?

I never went to a doctor. Bloodied. Black eyes for weeks.

Well, that's love for you.

He deserved better than me. After the crime book came out, there wasn't a betrayal I didn't attempt. I sometimes thought that if he took me to a deserted island, I would walk out into the sea and fuck a squid just to cross him.

I heard it started even before the book.

What?

The infidelities.

Oh my God. I had no idea there were so many little stories about me. Perhaps you should have written for Playboy. What did you hear?

I heard you slept with one of those murderers.

WHAT?

From your crime novel. The cowboy who killed that little girl. I heard you fucked him the day he was going to be executed.

Oh my God. Who did you hear that from?

A good journalist always protects their sources. Is that story true?

What a horrifying question! I won't answer it.

It's true, isn't it!

I never ... I never fucked him.

Were you fucked by him?

So crass! No — Christ, I don't do that! You know that!

But something happened in that jail cell. Didn't it?

God. Yes. Something happened.

But you're not going to tell me what happened, are you?

No. Oh my God no.

I can't believe it. That cowboy murdered
a 14-year-old girl!

I know.

You like them rough, do you?

He was less rough than you might think. Did you know
he wrote songs?

No.

I went through his cell after they hanged him. I found
a book of songs he had written. There were almost
100 melodies in it, all written on death row.

I imagine there isn't much else to do.

Can you guess what he wrote about?

No. Tell me.

Rodeo queens. High school girls. Mexican prostitutes.
They were all love songs.

That must have been very interesting for you.

Why?

Because, basically, all you write are love letters.

Is that your literary criticism? You are the only one w
ho has ever thought that.

I don't care. I'm right. You are like a little boy. You are so embarrassed to be in love that you get nasty. You tease, you tell mean stories. But I know what it means when my pigtails are getting dipped into ink.

Do you believe that's what my Playboy story is?

I haven't read it. But I read your crime novel.

And?

And it's a love letter to the cowboy. But instead of admitting it, you must tell every little horrifying story you can dig up about the man. You have to linger on the moment when he cuts that little girl's throat. It is so infantile.

Is that why you never liked my writing?

Yes.

So I was right to run from you.

What? Why?

Because you did mean to harm me.

Oh, poor boy. You always turn into a little beast when you get criticized. But you're an utter failure as a writer, and it's time somebody told you.

I hope you enjoy this little moment of nastiness.
The next time I see that shock of red hair coming
up the street at me or bouncing through the crowd
at the club, I will make sure it is a men's bathroom
I duck into. This is the last time you will ever see me.

Oh, I doubt that. We share a coke dealer.

We do? Who?

The man with the birthmark on his face.

Chico?

His name isn't Chico. So much
for your famous memory.

You mean to say whatever is on your mind, don't you?

Yes.

Then be done with it.

You failed as a writer because there was only
one interesting story to come out of that farmhouse
murder, and you didn't write it.

What was that?

Whatever happened between you and the cowboy
on the day he was hanged.

Fuck you.

I bet it is the only thing in your life
that wasn't sad or seedy.

Fuck you.

I didn't mean to make you cry.

Oh, you're enjoying this.

Yes, I am.

Then I am leaving.

It's been fun. I look forward to seeing you running through traffic again.

Fuck you.

The Mick

What is it that you just threw at me?

A book.

One of mine?

I don't know.

Let me see. No. Flannery O'Conner. I suppose there is some irony to that. But it would have been better irony had you lugged one of my own books at me.

I was not thinking about the irony when I threw it.

Well, when I retell this story, I shall make it one of my books. Oh, what a tale! I don't think I have ever bled so much in my life! It's just awful.

I hope you are not expecting an apology.

Expecting? This whole encounter has been unexpected. I thought I would be getting another lecture.

It may still be forthcoming.

Oh, I don't think so. I wouldn't stand for that. You may lecture me, or you may fling books at me, but you may not do both. I imagine that I am in an awful lot of pain right now.

I imagine you are.

How convenient that I numbed myself well in advance of our encounter. You'll just have to pretend that I am screaming and flailing about.

Had I known you were so drunk, I might have chosen to lecture you instead.

This is so much more exciting! Perhaps I should run off to a cabin like Tennessee Williams. Tell myself I have only a few months to live and write something astounding. Oh, goodness! My nose is actually moving about on my face of its own accord!

I should be surprised that you are enjoying this so much.

But you are not.

No. I have started to think that you enjoy it. Every time I see you, you've got another fellow slapping your face or throwing a drink in your lap.

Aha! So that's what this is about. You saw me tonight.

Yes.

Aw, Christ. You know I always come back to you. I'm just fooling around, baby. Why else be famous? I didn't expect that you would be jealous.

Do you think I care who or what you fuck? Is that why you think I am angry?

I could never figure out the tempers of Boston Irish poets. You're all so thoughtful and subdued, and then I say the wrong thing and everybody's ears turn red and their eyes dart away from me. You would think that I would know enough to duck by now.

I will call down to the concierge and have them send up some ice.

And vodka, please.

Ice for your nose.

Oh, then don't bother. It will stop bleeding when it is done. You know that we meet the Queen Mother tomorrow.

Yes.

Won't I be in quite a state? Should I tell her you threw my New York book at me or my crime book?

Whatever you please.

Then I will tell her I was beaten in the streets by a roving gang of Irish nationalists. I will say that I would not stop singing Rule Britannia while they struck at me with their shillelaghs. How does that sound?

Very exciting. Why did they attack you?

I presume it was because I had spent a good part of the evening throwing money at a gorgeous London barkeep and finally convinced him to blow me in the back seat of a taxi. Somehow they witnessed this. Somehow, the goddamn micks always know what I am up to.

You're going to tell the Queen Mother that you were blown in the backseat of a taxi?

I hear she likes a good story.

You don't lack for good stories. It's a wonder you don't choke on them.

Hey? You used to love my stories, baby. Remember when we met? You used to buy me drinks just to hear me talk.

Aha. You remember that.

Yes, baby!

You remember when I was just a freckle-faced Boston lad, swooning over your every word, looking upon you as though I could see little cupids in your eyes.

Well, I wouldn't put it like that — too sentimental.
I think you are having sport with me.

You remember that boy, though.

Yes, baby. Of course I remember.

You remember a boy in uniform, fresh out of the military, filling up notebook after notebook with sonnets and sneaking his hand onto your knee at the Saturday matinees. Am I still being too sentimental?

Yes, baby, but I don't mind it. Memories!

Memories! I remember our first kiss, in my apartment in Chelsea, after you had spent the afternoon bullying a photographer from a magazine into taking your picture draped across a divan like some Turkish sultan. How many drinks did I put into you to get that kiss?

You didn't need to put any drinks into me to get a kiss, baby. I think we were just both bashful.

Bashful, eh? It was a bashful kiss. Our lips pressed together and then apart again, and it did not happen again for two months. I thought you must hate me.

Hardly, baby! I was crazy about you!

So when did you start to hate me?

You can't think that. I'm just a drunk, and it makes me stupid. I don't mean anything when I fool around. I'm awful fond of you.

And how do you think I feel about you?

Less fond, I would guess. And you would be right. I am spoiled and rotten and treats his friends badly. Do you know, I sometimes wonders if I am even tolerable.

And what do you conclude?

There must be something about me that you love, and so there must be something about me that is worth loving.

At the moment, I am hard-pressed to tell you just what that is.

Can I make a widdle guessy-poo, baby?

And what is your guessy-poo?

My stories? Of course?

You'll meet the Queen Mother tomorrow, and she will hear your stories, and like everybody else, she will fall in love with them. And where does that leave me?

You tell stories too, baby. What would I do without them?

My stories mean that much to you?

Yes!

Then I shall tell you one now. Would you like that?

I think I would. A bedtime story, I think, because I am going to pass out from loss of blood any moment now.

A bedtime story. Should I tell you one you already know?

Those are the best kind, baby! Is it a story about a midget?

Yes!

With a lisp?

Yes!

My favorite character! I expect that I will like this story very much!

Very well. How shall I begin?

Maybe with a bedtime prayer?

Well, isn't that fitting? Do you know that this midget used to pray to Saint Theresa every night.

Saint Theresa?

Can you tell me why?

I can't imagine, baby! What an interesting story!

You know that Saint Theresa had something to say about prayers, don't you?

Yes, in fact I do.

And what was that?

Saint Theresa said that more pain is caused by answered prayers that by unanswered prayers.

Do you think that's true?

I know it is, baby. So what did this midget pray for?

We'll save that until the end of the story. It will be the big surprise.

Oh, dear me, baby! I shall have to do my best to stay up for the entire story.

You like the story?

Very much.

I should warn you: It may not go so well.

Well, let me be the judge of that. But leave out any unpleasant details.

Oh. Perhaps I should skip the midget's childhood.

Please do. I suspect it was not happy.

Miserable. And you know what happens to children who are raised in a state of constant unhappiness.

Ugh. Only too well.

This midget grew badly. Now here's the part of the story that you will have to help me with. Can you do that?

Oh, yes! What do you need?

I need you to give me words when I ask for them. And here is where I ask you for my first word. When the midget grew up, what profession did he choose?

A jongleur!

A jongleur, yes, splendid. And what did he do?

He roamed the hillsides, singing little songs and telling jokes to entertain peasants.

And our jongleur had a strange genius. People fell in love with him. Every cruel thing he said, every petty action he took has a strange beauty to it. Those who loved him followed him everywhere. They even followed him to the gallows.

Oh. Baby, don't.

Would you like me to stop the story?

No. Just ... don't. Don't be unkind. Be fair when you tell this story.

Very well. I will tell you how I will be fair. I will ask you to help me again at this point in the story. How does that sound?

Swell, baby. Just swell.

So here we are at the gibbet, with the midget. A nd what do you think he's doing?

Writing a coronach.

My goodness, what a word! A coronach, yes, that will do very nicely. He composes dirges for the dead men. Does that seem like a fair way to tell our story?

Yes.

Now, there are some who say that the jongleur might have tried to do more for the hanged men. There are some who say that the midget could have talked to the judges, or the governors, or the hangmen, and convinced them to spare the men. But the people who say this aren't being fair, are they?

No.

No. They're being unkind. And furthermore, they are being even more unkind when they claim that the jongleur wanted the men to die, because then he would be able to write his coronaches, and his éloges, and epicedes about them. If there was art to be made of a hanging, our jongleur would make it. Now who would say such things?

Nobody who ever loved the jongleur.

But the men were hanged, and the jongleur sang his songs, and he became very famous. And why else have fame? You will have to help me out here. Why else have fame?

If not to dance?

If not to dance. Splendid. And he danced. He danced polkas, he danced polinaises, he danced mazurskas. If there was a dance to be danced, what do you think or jongleur did?

Danced them.

Why else have fame? But the jongleur was also filled with the bitterest of emotions. His mouth tasted like ash, and his ears buzzed with accusations, and his humors turned black and heavy. And why do you think this was?

Baby, I wish I knew.

Might it have been it because he had allowed hangings? Was it because he had grown rich and fat off their deaths? Who knows? Who would e ven say such a thing?

Nobody who ever loved the jongleur.

No. No indeed. Nobody who loved the jongleur would even dare think such a thing. But something happened to the midget. He continued to dance, and he started to drink, and his drinking became greater, and his dancing became greater. He drank seven kegs of beer a day, and danced 15 hours. His face and limbs were soaked with alcohol, and his legs grew hot from the friction of his feet striking the floor, and they moved so fast that they let off sparks.

Sparks.

Terrible, hot sparks, yes. They would smoke and burn the floor around him. And one day, when his shirt and pants were soaked with alcohol, a spark set him alight. And up he went like a chubby little candle, spinning and burning. And those who loved him rushed to him to put out the flames, and

they too were caught in the conflagration. Some were burned terribly. Some died in the fire. Some suffocated from the smoke. And the last thing any of them heard was the jongleur. And what do you think he was doing?

Singing?

No. He had stopped singing many years earlier. What else?

Well ... are we at the end of our story?

Yes.

Then he must have been praying.

Yes. They heard him praying.

To Saint Theresa.

Yes.

And do we find out now what the jongleur prayed for?

Yes.

My breath is in my throat. Tell me!

He prayed that no prayer should ever again be answered.

Yes.

Do you see? The story does not end well.

Very badly.

Yes. And where do you think I was during the fire.

I don't know.

Long gone. It's a fool who rushes to put out a fire and gets burned as well.

I see.

Next week we will have been together 16 years.

16 years is a long time to be together.

16 is as long as we will ever be together.
After all, who could stay and watch you destroy yourself.

Somebody?

No. Nobody. Nobody who ever loved the jongleur.
What do you think about that?

It's the best lecture you have ever given me.

Thank you. Have you stopped bleeding?

No.

Cowboy

I did not think you would come.

I was not sure that I would come either. But how could I not see you?

Did you speak to the governor?

No.

No?

He would not see me. I have told you. There is nothing I can do.

Well. Well. So it is. So I die. I am glad you came, though. You had asked me about my songs.

Yes.

I want to sing one to you. Every time you come to my cell, you look at my guitar and ask about it.

I have always been curious about your songs.

Do you think this will be good for your book? To hear one of my songs?

I am sure it will be good for my book. And whatever the case, I want to hear you sing anyway. I am curious.

I know. But I'm shy singing for people. I only ever sang for myself. But I don't expect it will matter much after today. I might as well go ahead and make a fool of myself in front of you.

Well, I am very glad. I am glad to hear the song, and I don't expect that you will seem foolish at all.

Wasn't I your man?
Wasn't you my gal?
I was lucky then--
I had it all.
What did I say
To make you cry like that?
You showed me the door,
You handed me my hat.

What can I say
I ain't already said?
I miss your voice.
I miss our bed.
Wasn't we in love?
Wasn't we a pair?
I reach in the dark
And find you ain't there.

What am I now?
Not much of a man.
I sleep where I lie down,
I work where I can.
I wait for the day
When you call me home.
I ain't half what I used to be,
But I'm twice as alone.

Did you write that?

Yes. What do you think?

I like it very much.

Do you?

Yes.

I used to think that if this hadn't happened, I might have gone into songwriting. Or painting, or something. Writing, like you do. I always thought, if it wasn't for that one bad thing that I done, I might have wound up just like you.

I don't see why not.

Well, that ain't gonna happen now.
Did you see the hanging?

Yes.

What was it like?

Are you sure you want to hear this?

Yes. It's gonna be my turn soon. I want to
know what to expect.

It was surprising.

How?

It seemed more like a rehearsal than an execution.
He seemed like a tailor's dummy.

Why?

He was wrapped up. He was put into a straightjacket,
and a hood was put over his head. And when they
opened the trap door, he fell a short distance. It
happened so gently, it was impossible to believe that
anybody had died.

Will I wear a straightjacket and a hood?

Yes.

So I won't be able to see anything?

No.

And nobody will see me?

Nobody will see you.

I think that's for the best. Did you talk to him before they hanged him?

Yes. He asked me to pray with him. He said he believed he was going to a better place.

Do you believe that?

I don't know. But I prayed with him. Do you think you will go to a better place?

I believe there is a better place. I hope I'm going to it.

You seem pale. How are you doing?

Not well. I have thrown up three times today. I can't keep my food down. The guards won't look at me or talk to me. If I don't distract myself, I start shaking. It takes over my whole body. I can't control it.

Have you seen a minister?

No. I'm gonna speak to one just before they come to take me. Just like in the movies.

What will you tell him?

I'll tell him I don't mind dying if it makes things even for that little girl I killed. I just want everything to be even.

Do you think it will be even?

No. Nothing will ever make things even for a dead 14-year-old girl.

You think about her often, don't you?

Yes. I think about that moment when I was in her room with her, and she was tied to the bed. She was begging me not to hurt her even as I was cutting her throat.

Was there ever a time when you thought that you would stop? That you wouldn't hurt the girl?

No. I went into that room to kill her. I never questioned it. I didn't enjoy doing it, but it had to be done. She seemed like a nice girl, though.

Why do you say that?

When I was walking to her room, I heard her begging. She was begging for the lives of her family. If we had swapped places, I would have begged for myself. I would not even have thought about my family. I remember thinking that it was mighty decent of her to beg for everybody like that.

How long did it take for you to kill her?

I don't know. How long does it take to cut a throat? I put her on her side, so the blood wouldn't spray onto me.

Was there a lot of blood?

Yes. When you cut a throat, the blood spurts out of it. But I've slaughtered cattle all my life, so it didn't surprise me none.

If you could speak to her now, what would you say?

I don't know. I would ask her not to hate me. So many people seem to hate me.

Should they?

Sometimes I think yes. But sometimes I think: if it wasn't for that one night, I would just be another farmhand. Except for doing one terrible thing, I never d id anything worth hating.

Who do you think hates you?

Oh, hell, who doesn't? Since I got arrested, you are the only person from outside this jail who has had a kind word for me. Even my lawyers treat me like I'm some kind of dangerous animal.

I think you could have had better lawyers.

I could have used help in here, that's for sure. Any help. I didn't get much.

Must we go through this again? I talked to whoever I could talk to. Believe me, if I could have done more, I would have.

Really? I would not have lifted a finger. If I was you and you was me, I would have let you hang.

Why?

Because it would make a better ending to my book.

No. People like happy endings.

In a few hours you'll have one. When I'm dead, everybody can go home and not worry about anything anymore. What could be happier than that?

Don't talk like that.

Why?

It's not true. It is terrible that they are going to execute you.

I don't think so. My life ain't worth that much. Maybe I should have gone into the army. If I'd died in a war, my life might mean something. But I've got nothing to live for. There is nothing I will miss.

You don't have any happy memories at all?

Some. I like learning new words. That's why I think I could have been a writer. Do you know what word I learned today?

What?

Aperçu. It's an outline or a syllabus. I learned it from the dictionary you gave me. But now I don't think I'm going to get to use the word in a sentence.

Sure you can. Ask me about my book.

How's your book coming?

I've finished the outline.

So your aperçu is coming along nicely.

Aha!

I don't think I have anything else to say to you, unless you want to talk about the murder some more.

No.

Then we might as well end our conversations today. You need to finish your book anyway.

Yes.

How will you end it? Will you write about the conversations we have had?

No.

No?

I am not a character in my book. I will use our conversations to reconstruct the events.

The events of the crime?

Yes.

And then the hangings?

Yes.

I wish there was some way to let you know what I am thinking when they hang me, so you could put it in your book.

What do you imagine you will be thinking?

That I'm going to shit myself. That when they cut my body down, it will be a mess. My tongue will be sticking out of my mouth. My eyes will be all bugged out. And I will reek of shit.

Will you think about anything else?

That I hope it will be over quickly.

It will. The other hanging only took 10 minutes, all told. It seemed to happen too quickly. I felt like there should have been speeches, or something.

Why?

It didn't seem like a thing that needed to be rushed. The execution took less time than we have been talking.

I want to ask you something.

Yes.

Will you look at my body after I die?

Yes.

So you can describe it in your book?

Perhaps. Does that make you unhappy?

Yes.

Why?

I'm awful vain. Haven't you figured that out?

Why do you say you're vain?

I ran out of something yesterday, so I asked the guards to get me some more of it. They had to go out of their way to do so. Do you know what that thing was?

Yes.

You spoke to the guards?

Yes.

There’s not a question you won’t ask, is there?

It came up in conversation. He mentioned you had an unusual request.

What was it?

Pomade.

When I ran out of pomade, and I thought I would have to go to the gallows without doing up my hair, I vomited. It was the most frightened I have been.

You want to make sure your hair looks right before they take you to the gallows.

Heck, yes. Tell me that's not vain! But I only ever had one thing going for me.

What is that?

My face. Do you agree?

With what?

That I am a good-looking man.

Yes. You are a good-looking man.

How good looking?

Very. Very good looking.

I'm not smart and I'm not charming, but I could always rely on my smile to get me what I needed.

Like what?

I don't know. Jobs, sometimes. Dates. It didn't ever matter how much trouble I was in; people always seemed to give me another chance.

Until now.

Naw. Even now. The guards treat me pretty well. They would even hang around and bullshit with me, give me cigarettes. Nobody ever gave me trouble while I was locked up.

You think the guards were nice to you because you are good looking?

Sure. It's why you're nice to me, isn't it?

No! What?

You've come to visit me for two years. Is that all because of your book?

No.

It's because you like looking at me.

No! I've enjoyed our talks. I think of you as a friend.

You know I don't believe that. Outside this prison, you and I would never be friends. I'm just a stupid goddamn farmhand.

I think we would be friends. I don't know how many times I have to tell you that. We would be friends.

If you wanted to screw me, we would.

Don't say that.

I don't mind it. What else would we have to do together? I'm not smart, I don't know any funny stories and I get mean when I'm drunk.

I also get mean when I'm drunk.

Well, at least we have that in common. That and the fact that we both like my pretty face.

Don't say that.

Don't get upset; it's all right with me. The only thing I have had to look forward to these past two years have been your visits.

But you question my motives.

You haven't given me any reason not to.

What do you want me to tell you?

Why me? Why spend all this time with me? I heard you bribed a man to get into this prison. They give you free run of this place! They open the door and in you walk, right into my cell. Why would you want to do that?

At first, because I thought you had a good story to tell.

Weren't you scared? Weren't you at all afraid of being alone in a cell with a man who had cut the throat of a little girl?

Yes. I almost didn't come. I'm not a very brave man.

Did you think I would hurt you?

I was afraid to even think about it. The first time we met, I could hardly speak; I was so frightened.

Then why?

I can't explain it. I'm suppose I'm fascinated by misbehavior.

Well, I suppose I've misbehaved in my life.

I was just going to write about the murders. I didn't even care who killed the family when I started the book — I just wanted to write about how a crime like this would affect a town. But when you were arrested, and I saw your photo, I knew I was going to have to write about you as well. I had to know why.

Why what?

Why you killed her. You didn't seem like a killer.

I am a killer. I could kill you right now. They're gonna hang me soon, so it wouldn't make to much difference.

I suppose you could. Why don't you?

I don't reckon I have any real reason to. It wouldn't do me any good, and it wouldn't do you much good either.

I'm glad.

Don't look so nervous; I'd never hurt you. I like you!

I like you too. That's why I've come back to talk to you for all this time.

But if I dropped to my knees right now and started sucking your cock you wouldn't complain either, would you?

God. I don't want you to think of me like that. Whatever has happened between us ... I want you to think of me as your friend.

Well, I apologize. I was never very good at holding my tongue, and now that I'm gonna die there don't seem to be no reason not to say what's on my mind.

I don't want you to think I've used you — in any way. You know?

Hell, we used each other. It gets lonely on death row; I would have done anything to keep you coming back to talk with me — whatever you wanted in return, I was happy to do. I used you for your company. It didn't matter to me if we talked or whatever. Better than being locked up all alone. So I used you too.

I don't mind.

So tell the truth. What was it about my photo that got you so curious? Why did you think I wasn't a killer?

I don't want to tell you.

Aw. Goddamn you. Why not?

If I tell you, it will just confirm your suspicions about me.

So confirm them. It won't bother me. What was it you saw in my photograph?

You were so....

What? I was so what?

You were so. Fucking. Beautiful. Clear eyes, good hair, bright smile. I saw that photo and thought, "This is a killer?"

There. That's why I want to do my hair up before I go to the gallows. Because right up until the moment when I die, it's important.

Important?

It's important that I'm beautiful. That's why I don't want you to see me after they have hanged me.

I don't understand.

Because I don't want you to remember me that way.

Why is that important to you?

I don't want you looking at my dead body and seeing it all messed up. I want you to remember me with perfect hair. Do you promise me you won't look at my body?

It's really that important to you?

Yes.

I promise.

Thank you. So when you write your book, and you talk about me being taken to the gallows, what will you say?

I will write about how nice your hair was.

And how will you end it?

With them putting the hood over your head, and the noose around your neck, and then dropping you through the trapdoor.

And then?

And then nothing. That will be the end of my novel.

A happy ending.

Not so happy.

Oh, I think it is. And you've worked awful hard on it, and now you're going to be able to finish it. How long you been at this?

Six years.

You must be glad that it's almost over. I would be.

Glad? No. But relieved, yes, a little.

And what do you think? Will people read the book?

Yes.

Will it be a bestseller?

Yes.

So you're going to be famous! Rich and famous! I'm glad for you. Something good has got to come out of all this. That seems like a happy ending to me. Don't it seem like a happy ending to you?

Does it?

Heck yes! This has all got to mean something, in the end, don't it? Tell me that when I get hanged, it's going to mean something. Tell me we got us a happy ending here.

Yes. We do. We have. We've got it.

What?

A happy ending.